

Homily 22 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

Do not take thought for necessary things, but trust in God's providence and seek the kingdom of Heaven.

Topics: "Providence Of God", "Kingdom Priorities"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of trusting in God's providential care, highlighting how even the lilies of the field are beautifully adorned by God without toiling or spinning, surpassing even Solomon's glory. He emphasizes the need to seek the kingdom of Heaven first, assuring that God will provide for our necessities. Chrysostom encourages earnest prayer and repentance, reminding that God is eager to bestow His blessings upon those who ask with faith and persistence, even surpassing our expectations. He urges believers to prioritize spiritual matters over worldly concerns, trusting in God's abundant grace and mercy.

Transcript

Matthew 5:28-29.

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin. And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

Having spoken of our necessary food, and having signified that not even for this should we take thought, He passes on in what follows to that which is more easy. For raiment is not so necessary as food.

Why then did He not make use here also of the same example, that of the birds, neither mention to us the peacock, and the swan, and the sheep? For surely there were many such examples to take from thence. Because He would point out how very far the argument may be carried both ways: both from the vileness of the things that partake of such elegance, and from the munificence vouchsafed to the lilies, in respect of their adorning. For this cause, when He has decked them out, He does not so much as call them lilies any more, but grass of the field. Matthew 6:30 And He is not satisfied even with this name, but again adds another circumstance of vileness, saying, which today is. And He said not, and tomorrow is not, but what is much baser yet, is cast into the oven. And He said not, clothe, but so clothe.

Do you see everywhere how He abounds in amplifications and intensities? And this He does, that He may touch them home: and therefore He has also added, shall He not much more clothe you? For this too has much emphasis: the force of the word, you, being no other than to indicate covertly the great value set

upon our race, and the concern shown for it; as though He had said, you, to whom He gave a soul, for whom He fashioned a body, for whose sake He made all the things that are seen, for whose sake He sent prophets, and gave the law, and wrought those innumerable good works; for whose sake He gave up His only begotten Son.

And not till He has made His proof clear, does He proceed also to rebuke them, saying, O you of little faith. For this is the quality of an adviser: He does not admonish only, but reproveth also, that He may awaken men the more to the persuasive power of His words.

Hereby He teaches us not only to take no thought, but not even to be dazzled at the costliness of men's apparel. Why, such comeliness is of grass, such beauty of the green herb: or rather, the grass is even more precious than such apparelling. Why then pride yourself on things, whereof the prize rests with the mere plant, with a great balance in its favor?

And see how from the beginning He signifies the injunction to be easy; by the contraries again, and by the things of which they were afraid, leading them away from these cares. Thus, when He had said, Consider the lilies of the field, He added, they toil not: so that in desire to set us free from toils, did He give these commands. In fact, the labor lies, not in taking no thought, but in taking thought for these things. And as in saying, they sow not, it was not the sowing that He did away with, but the anxious thought; so in saying, they toil not, neither do they spin, He put an end not to the work, but to the care.

But if Solomon was surpassed by their beauty, and that not once nor twice, but throughout all his reign:-- for neither can one say, that at one time He was clothed with such apparel, but after that He was so no more; rather not so much as on one day did He array Himself so beautifully: for this Christ declared by saying, in all his reign: and if it was not that He was surpassed by this flower, but vied with that, but He gave place to all alike (wherefore He also said, as one of these: for such as between the truth and the counterfeit, so great is the interval between those robes and these flowers):-- if then he acknowledged his inferiority, who was more glorious than all kings that ever were: when will you be able to surpass, or rather to approach even faintly to such perfection of form?

After this He instructs us, not to aim at all at such ornament. See at least the end thereof; after its triumph it is cast into the oven: and if of things mean, and worthless, and of no great use, God has displayed so great care, how shall He give up you, of all living creatures the most important?

Wherefore then did He make them so beautiful? That He might display His own wisdom and the excellency of His power; that from everything we might learn His glory. For not the Heavens only declare the glory of God, but the earth too; and this David declared when he said, Praise the Lord, you fruitful trees, and all cedars. For some by their fruits, some by their greatness, some by their beauty, send up praise to Him who made them: this too being a sign of great excellency of wisdom, when even upon things that are very vile (and what can be viler than that which today is, and tomorrow is not?) He pours out such great beauty. If then to the grass He has given that which it needs not (for what does the beauty thereof help to the feeding of the fire?) how shall He not give unto you that which you need? If that which is the vilest of all things, He has lavishly adorned, and that as doing it not for need, but for munificence, how much more will He honor you, the most honorable of all things, in matters which are of necessity.

2. Now when, as you see, He had demonstrated the greatness of God's providential care, and they were in what follows to be rebuked also, even in this He was sparing, laying to their charge not want, but poverty, of faith. Thus, if God, says He, so clothe the grass of the field, much more you, O you of little faith.

Matthew 6:30

And yet surely all these things He Himself works. For all things were made by Him, and without Him was not so much as one thing made. John 1:3 But yet He nowhere as yet makes mention of Himself: it being sufficient for the time, to indicate His full power, that He said at each of the commandments, You have heard that it has been said to them of old time, but I say unto you.

Marvel not then, when in subsequent instances also He conceals Himself, or speaks something lowly of Himself: since for the present He had but one object, that His word might prove such as they would readily receive, and might in every way demonstrate that He was not a sort of adversary of God, but of one mind, and in agreement with the Father.

Which accordingly He does here also; for through so many words as He has spent He ceases not to set Him before us, admiring His wisdom, His providence, His tender care extending through all things, both great and small. Thus, both when He was speaking of Jerusalem, He called it the city of the Great King; Matthew 5:35 and when He mentioned Heaven, He spoke of it again as God's throne; Matthew 5:34 and when He was discoursing of His economy in the world, to Him again He attributes it all, saying, He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. Matthew 5:45 And in the prayer too He taught us to say, His is the kingdom and the power and the glory. And here in discoursing of His providence, and signifying how even in little things He is the most excellent of artists, He says, that He clothes the grass of the field. And nowhere does He call Him His own Father, but theirs; in order that by the very honor He might reprove them, and that when He should call Him His Father, they might no more be displeased.

Now if for bare necessities one is not to take thought, what pardon can we deserve, who take thought for things expensive? Or rather, what pardon can they deserve, who do even without sleep, that they may take the things of others?

3. Therefore take no thought, saying, what shall we eat? Or, what shall we drink? Or, wherewithal shall we be clothed? For after all these things do the nations of the world seek.

Do you see how again He has both shamed them the more, and has also shown by the way, that He had commanded nothing grievous nor burdensome? As therefore when He said, If you love them which love you, it is nothing great which you practise, for the very Gentiles do the same; by the mention of the Gentiles He was stirring them up to something greater: so now also He brings them forward to reprove us, and to signify that it is a necessary debt which He is requiring of us. For if we must show forth something more than the Scribes or Pharisees, what can we deserve, who so far from going beyond these, do even abide in the mean estate of the Gentiles, and emulate their littleness of soul?

He does not however stop at the rebuke, but having by this reprov'd and roused them, and shamed them with all strength of expression, by another argument He also comforts them, saying, For your Heavenly Father knows that you have need of all these things. He said not, God knows, but, your Father knows; to lead them to a greater hope. For if He be a Father, and such a Father, He will not surely be able to overlook His children in extremity of evils; seeing that not even men, being fathers, bear to do so.

And He adds along with this yet another argument. Of what kind then is it? That you have need of them. What He says is like this. What! Are these things superfluous, that He should disregard them? Yet not even in superfluities did He show Himself wanting in regard, in the instance of the grass: but now are

these things even necessary. So that what you consider a cause for your being anxious, this I say is sufficient to draw you from such anxiety. I mean, if you say, Therefore I must needs take thought, because they are necessary; on the contrary, I say, Nay, for this self-same reason take no thought, because they are necessary. Since were they superfluities, not even then ought we to despair, but to feel confident about the supply of them; but now that they are necessary, we must no longer be in doubt. For what kind of father is he, who can endure to fail in supplying to his children even necessities? So that for this cause again God will most surely bestow them.

For indeed He is the artificer of our nature, and He knows perfectly the wants thereof. So that neither can you say, He is indeed our Father, and the things we seek are necessary, but He knows not that we stand in need of them. For He that knows our nature itself, and was the framer of it, and formed it such as it is; evidently He knows its need also better than thou, who art placed in want of them: it having been by His decree, that our nature is in such need. He will not therefore oppose Himself to what He has willed, first subjecting it of necessity to so great want, and on the other hand again depriving it of what it wants, and of absolute necessities.

Let us not therefore be anxious, for we shall gain nothing by it, but tormenting ourselves. For whereas He gives both when we take thought, and when we do not, and more of the two, when we do not; what do you gain by your anxiety, but to exact of yourself a superfluous penalty? Since one on the point of going to a plentiful feast, will not surely permit himself to take thought for food; nor is he that is walking to a fountain anxious about drink. Therefore seeing we have a supply more copious than either any fountain, or innumerable banquets made ready, the providence of God; let us not be beggars, nor little minded.

4. For together with what has been said, He puts also yet another reason for feeling confidence about such things, saying,

Seek the kingdom of Heaven, and all these things shall be added unto you.

Thus when He had set the soul free from anxiety, then He made mention also of Heaven. For indeed He came to do away with the old things, and to call us to a greater country. Therefore He does all, to deliver us from things unnecessary, and from our affection for the earth. For this cause He mentioned the heathens also, saying that the Gentiles seek after these things; they whose whole labor is for the present life, who have no regard for the things to come, nor any thought of Heaven. But to you not these present are the chief things, but other than these. For we were not born for this end, that we should eat and drink and be clothed, but that we might please God, and attain unto the good things to come. Therefore as things here are secondary in our labor, so also in our prayers let them be secondary. Therefore He also said, Seek the kingdom of Heaven, and all these things shall be added unto you.

And He said not, shall be given, but shall be added, that you might learn, that the things present are no great part of His gifts, compared with the greatness of the things to come. Accordingly, He does not bid us so much as ask for them, but while we ask for other things, to have confidence, as though these also were added to those. Seek then the things to come, and you will receive the things present also; seek not the things that are seen, and you shall surely attain unto them. Yea, for it is unworthy of you to approach your Lord for such things. And thou, who ought to spend all your zeal and your care for those unspeakable blessings, dost greatly disgrace yourself by consuming it on the desire of transitory things.

How then? says one, did He not bid us ask for bread? Nay, He added, daily, and to this again, this day, which same thing in fact He does here also. For He said not, Take no thought, but, Take no thought for the

morrow, at the same time both affording us liberty, and fastening our soul on those things that are more necessary to us.

For to this end also He bade us ask even those, not as though God needed reminding by us, but that we might learn that by His help we accomplish whatever we do accomplish, and that we might be made more His own by our continual prayer for these things.

Do you see how by this again He would persuade them, that they shall surely receive the things present? For He that bestows the greater, much more will He give the less. For not for this end, says He, did I tell you not to take thought nor to ask, that you should suffer distress, and go about naked, but in order that you might be in abundance of these things also: and this, you see, was suited above all things to attract them to Him. So that like as in almsgiving, when deterring them from making a display to men, He won upon them chiefly by promising to furnish them with it more liberally;-- for your Father, says He, who sees in secret, shall reward you openly; Matthew 6:4 -- even so here also, in drawing them off from seeking these things, this is His persuasive topic, that He promises to bestow it on them, not seeking it, in greater abundance. Thus, to this end, says He, do I bid you not seek, not that you may not receive, but that you may receive plentifully; that you may receive in the fashion that becomes you, with the profit which you ought to have; that you may not, by taking thought, and distracting yourself in anxiety about these, render yourself unworthy both of these, and of the things spiritual; that you may not undergo unnecessary distress, and again fall away from that which is set before you.

5. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof: that is to say, the affliction, and the bruising thereof. Matthew 5:34 Is it not enough for you, to eat your bread in the sweat of your face? Why add the further affliction that comes of anxiety, when you are on the point to be delivered henceforth even from the former toils?

By evil here He means, not wickedness, far from it, but affliction, and trouble, and calamities; much as in another place also He says, Is there evil in a city, which the Lord has not done? nor any thing like these, but the scourges which are borne from above. And again, I, says He, make peace, and create evils: Isaiah 45:7 For neither in this place does He speak of wickedness, but of famines, and pestilences, things accounted evil by most men: the generality being wont to call these things evil. Thus, for example, the priests and prophets of those five lordships, when having yoked the cattle to the ark, they let them go without their calves, 1 Samuel 6:9 gave the name of evil to those heaven-sent plagues, and the dismay and anguish which thereby sprang up within them.

This then is His meaning here also, when He says, sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. For nothing so pains the soul, as carefulness and anxiety. Thus did Paul also, when urging to celibacy, give counsel, saying, I would have you without carefulness.

But when He says, the morrow shall take thought for itself, He says it not, as though the day took thought for these things, but forasmuch as He had to speak to a people somewhat imperfect, willing to make what He says more expressive, He personifies the time, speaking unto them according to the custom of the generality.

And here indeed He advises, but as He proceeds, He even makes it a law, saying, provide neither gold nor silver, nor scrip for your journey. Matthew 10:9-10 Thus, having shown it all forth in His actions, then after that He introduces the verbal enactment of it more determinately, the precept too having then become more easy of acceptance, confirmed as it had been previously by His own actions. Where then

did He confirm it by His actions? Hear Him saying, The Son of Man has not where to lay His head. Matthew 8:20 Neither is He satisfied with this only, but in His disciples also He exhibits His full proof of these things, by fashioning them too in like manner, yet not suffering them to be in want of anything.

But mark His tender care also, how He surpasses the affection of any father. Thus, This I command, says He, for nothing else, but that I may deliver you from superfluous anxieties. For even if today you have taken thought for tomorrow, you will also have to take thought again tomorrow. Why then what is over and above? Why force the day to receive more than the distress which is allotted to it, and together with its own troubles add to it also the burden of the following day; and this, when there is no chance of your lightening the other by the addition so taking place, but you are merely to exhibit yourself as coveting superfluous troubles? Thus, that He may reprove them the more, He does all but give life to the very time, and brings it in as one injured, and exclaiming against them for their causeless despite. Why, you have received the day, to care for the things thereof. Wherefore then add unto it the things of the other day also? Hath it not then burden enough in its own anxiety? Why now, I pray, do you make it yet heavier? Now when the Lawgiver says these things, and He that is to pass judgment on us, consider the hopes that He suggests to us, how good they are; He Himself testifying, that this life is wretched and wearisome, so that the anxiety even of the one day is enough to hurt and afflict us.

6. Nevertheless, after so many and so grave words, we take thought for these things, but for the things in Heaven no longer: rather we have reversed His order, on either side fighting against His sayings. For mark; Seek ye not the things present, says He, at all; but we are seeking these things for ever: seek the things in Heaven, says He; but those things we seek not so much as for a short hour, but according to the greatness of the anxiety we display about the things of the world, is the carelessness we entertain in things spiritual; or rather even much greater. But this does not prosper for ever; neither can this be forever. What if for ten days we think scorn? If for twenty? If for an hundred? Must we not of absolute necessity depart, and fall into the hands of the Judge?

But the delay has comfort. And what sort of comfort, to be every day looking for punishment and vengeance? Nay, if you would have some comfort from this delay, take it by gathering for yourself the fruit of amendment after repentance. Since if the mere delay of vengeance seem to you a sort of refreshment, far more is it gain not to fall into the vengeance. Let us then make full use of this delay, in order to have a full deliverance from the dangers that press upon us. For none of the things enjoined is either burdensome or grievous, but all are so light and easy, that if we only bring a genuine purpose of heart, we may accomplish all, though we be chargeable with countless offenses. For so Manasses had perpetrated innumerable pollutions, having both stretched out his hands against the saints, and brought abominations into the temple, and filled the city with murders, and wrought many other things beyond excuse; yet nevertheless after so long and so great wickedness, he washed away from himself all these things. How and in what manner? By repentance, and consideration.

For there is not, yea, there is not any sin, that does not yield and give way to the power of repentance, or rather to the grace of Christ. Since if we would but only change, we have Him to assist us. And if you are desirous to become good, there is none to hinder us; or rather there is one to hinder us, the devil, yet has he no power, so long as you choose what is best, and so attract God to your aid. But if you are not yourself willing, but startest aside, how shall He protect you? Since not of necessity or compulsion, but of your own will, He wills you to be saved. For if you yourself, having a servant full of hatred and aversion for you, and continually going off, and fleeing away from you, would not choose to keep him, and this though needing his services; much less will God, who does all things not for His own profit, but for your salvation,

choose to retain you by compulsion; as on the other hand, if you show forth a right intention only, He would not choose ever to give you up, no, not whatever the devil may do. So that we are ourselves to blame for our own destruction. Because we do not approach, nor beseech, nor entreat Him, as we ought: but even if we do draw near, it is not as persons who have need to receive, neither is it with the proper faith, nor as making demand, but we do all in a gaping and listless way.

7. And yet God would have us demand things of Him, and for this accounts Himself greatly bound to you. For He alone of all debtors, when the demand is made, counts it a favor, and gives what we have not lent Him. And if He should see him pressing earnestly that makes the demand, He pays down even what He has not received of us; but if sluggishly, He too keeps on making delays; not through unwillingness to give, but because He is pleased to have the demand made upon Him by us. For this cause He told you also the example of that friend, who came by night, and asked a loaf; Luke 11:5-8 and of the judge that feared not God, nor regarded men. Luke 18:1-8 And He stayed not at similitudes, but signified it also in His very actions, when He dismissed that Phœnician woman, having filled her with His great gift. For through her He signified, that He gives to them that ask earnestly, even the things that pertain not to them. For it is not meet, says He, to take the children's bread, and to give it unto the dogs. But for all that He gave, because she demanded of him earnestly. But by the Jews He showed, that to them that are careless, He gives not even their own. They accordingly received nothing, but lost what was their own. And while these, because they asked not, did not receive so much as their very own; she, because she assailed Him with earnestness, had power to obtain even what pertained to others, and the dog received what was the children's. So great a good is importunity. For though thou be a dog, yet being importunate, you shall be preferred to the child being negligent: for what things affection accomplishes not, these, all of them, importunity did accomplish. Say not therefore, God is an enemy to me, and will not hearken. He does straightway answer you, continually troubling him, if not because you are His friend, yet because of your importunity. And neither the enmity, or the unseasonable time, nor anything else becomes an hindrance. Say not, I am unworthy, and do not pray; for such was the Syrophœnician woman too. Say not, I have sinned much, and am not able to entreat Him whom I have angered; for God looks not at the desert, but at the disposition. For if the ruler that feared not God, neither was ashamed of men, was overcome by the widow, much more will He that is good be won over by continual entreaty.

So that though thou be no friend, though thou be not demanding your due, though you have devoured your Father's substance, and have been a long time out of sight, though without honor, though last of all, though thou approach Him angry, though much displeased; be willing only to pray, and to return, and you shall receive all, and shall quickly extinguish the wrath and the condemnation.

But, behold, I pray, says one, and there is no result. Why, you pray not like those; such I mean as the Syrophœnician woman, the friend that came late at night, and the widow that is continually troubling the judge, and the son that consumed his father's goods. For did you so pray, you would quickly obtain. For though despite have been done unto Him, yet is He a Father; and though He have been provoked to anger, yet is He fond of His children; and one thing only does He seek, not to take vengeance for our affronts, but to see you repenting and entreating Him. Would that we were warmed in like measure, as those bowels are moved to the love of us. But this fire seeks a beginning only, and if you afford it a little spark, you kindle a full flame of beneficence. For not because He has been insulted, is He sore vexed, but because it is thou who art insulting Him, and so becoming frenzied. For if we being evil, when our children molest us, grieve on their account; much more is God, who can not so much as suffer insult, sore vexed on account of you, who hast committed it. If we, who love by nature, much more He, who is kindly

affectioned beyond nature. For though, says He, a woman should forget the fruits of her womb, yet will I not forget you. Isaiah 49:15

8. Let us therefore draw near unto Him, and say, Truth, Lord; for even the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table. Matthew 15:27 Let us draw near in season, out of season: or rather, one can never draw near out of season, for it is unseasonable not to be continually approaching. For of Him who desires to give it is always seasonable to ask: yea, as breathing is never out of season, so neither is praying unseasonable, but rather not praying. Since as we need this breath, so do we also the help that comes from Him; and if we be willing, we shall easily draw Him to us. And the prophet, to manifest this, and to point out the constant readiness of His beneficence, said, We shall find Him prepared as the morning. For as often as we may draw near, we shall see Him awaiting our movements. And if we fail to draw from out of His ever-springing goodness, the blame is all ours. This, for example, was His complaint against certain Jews, when He said, My mercy is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goes away. And His meaning is like this; I indeed have supplied all my part, but you, as a hot sun coming over scatters both the cloud and the dew, and makes them vanish, so have ye by your great wickedness restrained the unspeakable Beneficence.

Which also itself again is an instance of providential care: that even when He sees us unworthy to receive good, He withholds His benefits, lest He render us careless. But if we change a little, even but so much as to know that we have sinned, He gushes out beyond the fountains, He is poured forth beyond the ocean; and the more you receive, so much the more does He rejoice; and in this way is stirred up again to give us more. For indeed He accounts it as His own wealth, that we should be saved, and that He should give largely to them that ask. And this, it may seem, Paul was declaring when He said, that He is rich unto all and over all that call upon Him. Because when we pray not, then He is angry; when we pray not, then does He turn away from us. For this cause He became poor, that He might make us rich; for this cause He underwent all those sufferings, that He might incite us to ask.

Let us not therefore despair, but having so many motives and good hopes, though we sin every day, let us approach Him, entreating, beseeching, asking the forgiveness of our sins. For thus we shall be more backward to sin for the time to come; thus shall we drive away the devil, and shall call forth the lovingkindness of God, and attain unto the good things to come, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and might forever and ever. Amen.

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